

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

The Life of a Purina Nutrition Veterinarian

Editor's Note: During the North American Veterinary Community (NAVC) Conference in January, third-year Cornell veterinary student Alina Ali talked to Dr. Jason Gagne about his job as veterinary communications manager for Purina. Though it has been functioning for many years, the American College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN)¹ is one of the most selective of the over 20 board specialties approved by the American Veterinary Medical Association with fewer than 100 diplomats, (compared, for example, to the American College of Veterinary Surgeons with over 1,600).

Donald F. Smith

By Alina Ali (Guest Author)

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What a pet eats is now considered one of the five vital assessments of every physical examination,² along with temperature, cardiac function, respiratory health and the presence and character of pain. Many of the exhibition booths I visited at the NAVC Conference showcased new diets, treats, and toys. The copious amounts of literature and advertising for nutritional products available to the consumer is enough to confuse even veterinarians.



Alina Ali, Guest Author, DVM Class of 2015, Cornell University
(Photo provided by Alina Ali)

Although one may think these are just marketing tactics, many of the diets undergo clinical trials for years before they are ready to be introduced to the public. Dr. Jason Gagne, who completed both his DVM and postgraduate residency in clinical nutrition at Cornell, helped me

understand the major role veterinarians have in the development, testing and marketing of pet foods.

Pet food companies routinely employ veterinarians for nutrition research and product development, safety, efficacy, palatability trials, and in marketing and education for consumers and practicing veterinarians. Hill's Pet Nutrition, for example, employs over 150 veterinarians world-wide, though only a small proportion of these are board-certified like Dr. Gagne. About one-third of ACVN diplomates are employed by veterinary colleges where their primary responsibilities are teaching and research, and serving as clinical nutritional specialist in the academic medical center and teaching hospital.

After Dr. Gagne received his DVM in 2009,

I practiced small animal medicine for a few years before going back to Cornell to begin a residency in nutrition, but I still practice once a week now while working with Purina. The company actually requires its veterinarians to practice for at least one year, and they encourage that they continue to practice part-time to give them a better understanding of the needs of their clients and pets.

After 2 years as a full-time general practitioner, Dr. Gagne returned to Cornell to pursue a residency in nutrition. Dr. Gagne's residency training involved extensive clinical experience as well as teaching veterinary students. He was also responsible for conducting clinically-relevant nutrition research. By the time he took the ACVN examination, he was qualified to formulate commercial foods, supplements and home-prepared diets, as well as develop specially-tailored diets for animals with various medical issues for which nutritional therapy would be critical to optimal medical management.

So what do nutritional experts actually do? Their schedule varies greatly from day to day, and many of the tasks incorporate education of basic nutrition for students, as well as continuing education for general practitioners and veterinary specialists. This requires them to travel to national conferences, as well as to their region's veterinary colleges. On occasion, veterinarians working for Purina will be consulted on study designs, or facilities.

As a pet food representative, education about their company's products make up a large part of day-to-day activities. Each product undergoes a very structured clinical trial, some of which have been designed by veterinarians. Many research projects conducted at universities are funded by pet food companies.

It is important as a representative to teach both students and veterinarians how to assess the nutritional status of an animal, and also address common misperceptions about pet food, so that the correct information can be passed onto clients and utilized.

I love teaching, and I was interested to learn how I could become a pet food industry veterinarian. Along with public speaking skills and a DVM with practice experience in the real world, a PhD or nutrition specialty is not required, but is definitely an asset that can open up further opportunities.

There is much opportunity for veterinarians to be involved in the pet food industry as it continues to grow. It will be essential to have informed individuals as spokespersons for pet food, especially with the increasing trends in grain-free, as well as raw food diets. The industry is constantly evolving, and healthy pets, as well as those with common disorders, are experiencing increased quantity and quality of life with the use commercial pet food and prescription diets.

¹ [American College of Veterinary Nutrition](#)

² Determined by the American Animal Hospital Association

KEYWORDS:

Jason Gagne
Alina Ali
North American Veterinary Community (NAVC)
Veterinary Nutrition
American College of Veterinary Nutrition
History of Veterinary Medicine

TOPIC:

Careers in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

Why is veterinary nutrition so important to pet health?

META-SUMMARY:

Veterinary student, Alina Ali, interviews a veterinary nutritionist, Dr. Jason Gagne.

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